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ABSTRACT

For teachers attempting to maintain a pluralistic atmosphere in the classroom, censorship creates a distressing dilemma. Complaints about textbooks reflect basic cultural beliefs that may conflict with those of teachers, textbook authors, and even the majority of students. Most censorship complaints stem from the current depression and frustration of people who feel that they no longer have control over their lives: if they cannot close down "x-rated" theaters and "head shops," they can certainly close down teachers who are polluting the minds of their children. If teachers defend their right to teach the books they believe in, they cannot ignore those who oppose their choices because they are the ones who place their trust in the schools to do what is best for their children. Censors have a right to be heard. Teachers who realize that promoting pluralism in the classroom will create value conflicts among students and families will be prepared to accomodate the viewpoints of censors, as well as to fight for teachers' beliefs. Otherwise, cultural pluralism will fail. (HTH)

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CENSORSHIP: A MULTICULTURAL ISSUE

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education (19th, Anaheim, CA, March 19-21, 1981)

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For those of us who profess to believe in the concept of cultural pluralism, having to deal with censorship creates a distressing dilemma. If we say that we believe in the right of each family to maintain its cultural identity, how do we respond to the family that claims certain books, stories, plays, or poems are offensive to its cultural values? Most simply, we can maintain that the school will not impinge upon the practices of the family and that it will attempt to present both sides of any given issue. But if the family sees education as an integral extension of the family, then what? And if the family's basic fundamentalistic beliefs will not allow consideration of the other side, then what? If a teacher, in attempting to maintain a pluralistic atmosphere in the classroom, admits all points of view, some of those points of view are bound to believe that pluralism is wrong. Furthermore, teachers cannot hide behind the simplistic notion that "We are merely discussing ideas, not forcing them upon people," for the belief that ideas are open to consideration may be offensive to many.

Consider some of the complaints about textbooks currently on the market. When one textbook referred to the Japanese Americans being placed in "concentration camps" during World War II, one reviewer wrote that such a choice of words was designed to instill hatred for the United States, that the camps were actually "relocation camps" in which the "Japanese" felt they were well treated and understood why they were there and were thankful for their kind treatment in those camps.

Another complaint argued against the space devoted to W.E.B. DuBois because he was a radical with a Communist organization named after him.

Another complaint argued that too much space was devoted to the environmental movement in this country when that movement was creating hardships for Americans.

Another complaint argued that unions were treated too kindly by a textbook, instead of stressing that those unions have been violent and disruptive, thereby opposing the American Way of Life.

Still another complaint noted the names of women who had not been included in previous texts and argued that the authors had included them simply to support the ERA.

Often the complaints revolve around word choices. The U.S. did not take land from Mexico in 1848, but in fact won the war. Eldridge Cleaver was not famous, but infamous. One national publisher issued a special version of its literature anthology for California alone, omitting the word damn, a word that was not omitted in the text for the rest of the country.

All such complaints reflect basic cultural viewpoints that may well conflict with those of the teachers, the textbook authors, and even the majority of students. If one believes that God placed us upon the earth to go forth and subdue the earth, then one may have trouble believing that one should live in harmony with the earth. If one believes in the essential value that individual rights should have precedence over community will, then competition may be the best thing for all, not cooperation; nor should one restrain one's efforts in order to allow any minority group a chance to catch up or have an equal opportunity.

Consider the Kanawha County, W. Va., textbook wars. Here was a school district that encompassed mostly middle class Charleston as its center, as well as the surrounding rural areas populated primarily by poor people. For years, the educational decisions for the schools had been generally controlled by Charleston, the major population center. Many of those outside of Charleston felt disenfranchised from power and influence over what the schools taught. When the call for censorship came, it provided the catalyst that the disenfranchised needed. They focused upon the books, but the books were essentially the easiest objective against which to mobilize their forces. The books became the primary public concern, but, underneath it all, the conflict was one of two cultures, both white, each having vastly different world views from the other.

Two recent books, Ed Jenkinson's Censors in the Classroom: The Mind Benders (Southern Illinois University Press) and James E. Davis' edited volume, Dealing with Censorship (NCTE), provide thoughtful considerations for us all. In Dealing with Censorship, Robert C. Small, Jr., recognizes that much of the call for censorship stems from the current depression and frustration of living in the United States. People have begun to feel that they have no control over their own lives. For most of the United States, government is seen as an ineffective, inefficient megolith that crushes our "right" to lead our lives however we wish.

For these people, the Supreme Court has not offered any respite from the constant onslaught of pornography in our streets, in the media, and in our schools. If they cannot close down the x-rated motels and theaters and restrict the operations of "head shops," they can certainly close down the operations of teachers who are polluting the minds of their children.

As teachers, protesting our rights as professionals will not change such attitudes one bit. As one parent once told me when I attempted to defend a book, "If you were a professional, you would know what is best for our children. You obviously do not."

The movement to the right in this country is, in part, a reflection of the feelings of powerlessness that people have. Prior to the presidential elections, during the primaries, National Public Radio carried one woman's analysis of the political situation when she explained how she would vote: "Not for Carter certainly....I think I'll vote for Kennedy or that there actor feller from California." We might well ask how our schools could have produced such thinkers, but the point here is that her vote, as the vote of many others, was a protest vote, a vote representing a basic feeling of powerlessness, often powerlessness before the Juggernaut of the School System, whatever that might mean.

While Ronald Reagan's politics have scared the hell out of many of us, his election represents that protest, a desire to return to the good old days, even though, for most of us, they were horrible. The growth of Scientific Creationism is but one more aspect of that protest, a movement grounded in basic cultural beliefs. The reactionary conservatism even went so far that, speaking before an evangelical fundamentalist group, the keynote speaker of the Republican Convention, Guy Van der Jagt, accused the Carter administration of being "unGodly," even though Carter himself was a born-again Christian.

We teachers often say we are concerned with the world beyond the school, while defending our right to teach the books we believe in, but we do not practice that concern consistently. If we did, we might be less critical of the censors. We cannot ignore those who oppose our choice of teaching materials, no matter how foolish, ignorant, brutal, or crazy the actions of censors may appear to be, for those are people who place their trust in the schools to do what is best for their children.

If this sounds as though I am defending censorship, I am not, but I am defending the right of the censors to be heard. And in doing so, I am caught in the dilemma I stated at the start. I believe in the absolute need to include minority literature as part of mainstream American literature. I believe in the need to confront our students with moral conflicts, realizing that doing so may only muddy the issues at first, but may ultimately produce stronger individuals. I recognize that much of the literature I would prefer to teach may be offensive to some. I am willing (and, I hope, able) to defend my choices, but I am, at the same time, willing to allow parents the right to dictate what their children will read, provided that they do not seek to impose their will on all others.

Granted, the choices of some parents may well be worse than the choices of the teachers. A few years back, a father complained about the book Mrs. Mike being taught to ninth graders in a school I had taught in. The teacher, librarian, and principal referred him to the recommendations of the American Library Association and NCTE regarding that book. His response was that, if the so-called

educators had to rely upon the so-called judgments of outside experts, then the so-called educators were greatly impaired in their own judgments. He declared that, henceforth, he would select the books his son would read from his own library, which the school then, wisely, agreed to. The first book his son brought to class was Gulliver's Travels, unexpurgated. But it was a classic; Mrs. Mike was not.

What, as English teachers, are we then to do? First, we must cleanse ourselves of all traces of missionary zeal. Our job is not to bring enlightenment to the natives. Too many cultures have been ruthlessly destroyed in the name of progress, righteousness, and moral imperative. And too many English teachers, diving into their profession with such zeal, have been caught in the nets of cultural beliefs counter to theirs and drowned.

Second, we need to recognize that all those folks who desire to censor the books we select were students once themselves, often in our own schools. After having talked about this problem before a state English conference, and after having cited some censorship problems from that state, a teacher whom I had referred to in one of my examples and who happened to be attending that conference came up to me afterward and told me that the censors who had attacked her choice of books were former students of hers, "not very good ones," she added. But not very good or outstanding, those students formed beliefs about the value of school and, whether they believed in their cause or not, used the books as the most convenient, immediate way of attacking the school system that they hated or, at best, mistrusted.

I believe it is essential for teachers to address conflicting beliefs in their classrooms. By creating lessons that involve students in discussions about controversial books and that allow those opposed to the books to argue their cases, we help develop a more open and educated citizenry. Teachers can allow students to survey community attitudes, can allow open discussion of potentially offensive literature, and can, in fact, bring in adults whose viewpoints differ about the literature being considered. Some might argue that such practices may actually foment controversy and censorship, but if we believe in a free and open society, then we cannot allow ourselves to censor those who oppose our viewpoints. And consider the strong defense we can make of such teaching when we point out to administrators and community both that one of our primary goals is to develop the evaluative skills of our students.

NCTE and its affiliates have offered many suggestions for handling censorship, both before and after it occurs. Teachers should be prepared to develop rationales for the literature they teach. If they cannot, then perhaps they should not be teaching those particular selections. Procedures for allowing citizens to oppose certain literary selections should be in force within school districts. Parents can actually be involved in the selection of textbooks. Having parents on textbook selection committees may provide a source of support when censorship attacks do occur.

Doubtless, we must ask ourselves why we offer particular selections. Do we really believe that literature can change persons' lives? If so, how can we argue that literature that

portrays the weaknesses of parents or the immorality of a government official or experimentation with drugs or sex does not cause students to question their parents or doubt their government or experiment with drugs or sex? To believe that studying literature can make better persons of us may also imply that it can possibly make worse persons of us, if we are willing to be honest with ourselves.

Many parents believe that literature should provide models for proper behavior: the behavior of their culture. Many believe that literature should provide clear answers to the moral problems of life. Many believe that schools should select literature that will reinforce the cultural values of their family. Yet many of us, English teachers all, would have to admit that we select literature often for contradictory reasons. We don't want students who conform without question. We want students to question simplistic ideas. We delight in the student who can argue from more than one perspective. We count it a success when our students recognize the relativity of values.

James Coleman has just produced a report that seems to show that private schools produce better results than public schools do. Yet private schools tend to be very selective in the values they pass on. In the April 1981 Phi Delta Kappan, M. Donald Thomas argues that pluralism has caused more grief for public education than was warranted. Both of these statements portend a more conservative view of the role of schools than we have had to deal with in recent years. One can argue that Thomas is, first,

a superintendent, and, as such, must maintain public relations at all cost. One can argue that he is superintendent in an extremely conservative community, Salt Lake City, in a state that has hardly been known to accept minorities except as religious converts and that relies upon excommunication as a way of handling public dissenters within The Church. Nevertheless, Coleman's and Thomas' statements reinforce the beliefs of cultures who seem to be in the ascendency, and, as teachers, we must recognize their right to be heard if, indeed, we believe in pluralism and if we wish to protect our right to make professional decisions.

Allow me a platitude: Teaching is a political act. What we decide to teach or not to teach directly influences our students and clearly relates, whether positively or not, to the communities in which we teach. Belief in pluralism is a political stand. When we select a particular piece of literature, we must be aware of the consequences of our selection. Being aware of negative consequences does not mean that we should reverse our decision, but it does mean that we should be sure of our reasons, prepared to defend them both morally and intellectually. Teaching is also an existential act: our choices all involve some unpleasant consequences. But if we are prepared for those consequences, if we truly believe in the need to confront certain issues in the classroom, then we cannot allow the censors to dominate our curricular decisions. Still, we must recognize their right to try, we must realize that they will try, and we must be prepared to stand behind our choices. Otherwise, we are intellectual robots,

aping what our professors taught us, mouthing indifferent Philistinisms about our belief in cultural pluralism.

Attempting to promote pluralism means that we will witness value conflicts among our students and their families. Realizing that, we can foresee those conflicts and prepare to handle them. Censorship is simply one means for one culture to fight the values of another culture. We can give in to the censors, in which case we are admitting the failure of cultural pluralism. Or, we can accommodate the viewpoints of the censors, give them a forum, fight for our beliefs, and allow all beliefs to be considered openly and fairly, in which case we are reinforcing our beliefs in cultural pluralism. "No one," to quote that commercial statement that seems to end up in every teachers' lounge, "ever said teaching was going to be easy." As an English teacher's exercise, I would like to paraphrase that line: No one ever said cultural pluralism would solve all our problems: no one ever said censorship would go away.

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